

Robes and Robemakers

Study Day at Trinity College, Oxford

Following the very successful study day in Cambridge in November 2003, a similar event was held in Oxford at Trinity College on Saturday 27 November 2004, with about twenty-five Burgon Society members and friends attending.

John Venables

After coffee and a welcome from the Chairman, Stephen James, the guest of honour, John Venables, was invited to talk about his family firm, Shepherd & Woodward, and robemaking in Oxford.

John's father, Dennis Venables had been apprenticed in 1927 to Arthur Shepherd who had run a tailor's shop in Oxford for fifty years. In 1929 Shepherd amalgamated his business with Wilton Woodward's at 110 High Street. At that time academic dress formed only a small part of the business. When Shepherd retired in 1945, Dennis Venables bought his share in the partnership.

John was born in 1937. He attended New College School in Oxford and then Bloxham School. At this time his father's firm was moving into supplying school uniforms—and Bloxham School became one of his customers. When John left school, he was apprenticed for four years to the Oxford department store of Elliston & Cavell, still a private company. It was a tyrannical regime, but a useful training. John's father took him into Shepherd & Woodward, and with the retirement of Sid Blackler, put him in charge of the now flourishing academic dress section.

Dennis Venables died in 1984 and John took over the direction of the firm. In the next few years several tailoring businesses and shops in Oxford came up for sale and Shepherd & Woodward acquired them: Walters in Turl Street, Bodgers, Castells in Broad Street. They had started another shop in Summertown, North Oxford, specialising in school wear, and now it had the same turnover as the High Street shop. John recalled that when he joined the firm the turnover had been £65,000 a year; now it was about £5 million.

When John joined his father's firm they would hire out about twenty-five or thirty gowns on a degree day; nowadays the number was 250 or more. Up to the 1950s and 60s there were several other tailors in Oxford specialising in academic dress, for example Adamsons, Taylor, Millin, and Chris Clarke at James Clarke & Son. None of these of these remained, but Hall Bros, in High Street, survived longer, and was eventually taken over by Ede & Ravenscroft. Fifty years ago Shepherd & Woodward employed many local outworkers to make up gowns; seven or eight worked on the undergraduate (commoner's) gown alone. Nearly all that work was now done abroad.

During the Second World War, the colours used for hoods were inconsistent, because suitable fabrics and dyes were difficult to come by. In 1956 John's father prepared a Register of Colours and Material, which was accepted by

the University's Hebdomadal Council in February 1957. A copy was kept in the University Archives and another by Shepherd & Woodward. Each was bound in leather and made up of parchment leaves to which were fixed patterns of silks, materials and fur. Following the acceptance of the Register, Dennis Venables and Ralph Clifford, who worked in the University Registry, collaborated in publishing a booklet entitled *The Academic Dress of the University of Oxford*. (John recalled that he and Ralph Clifford's son had been in the same class at school.) Ralph Clifford wrote the text and John's father prepared the academic dress for the photographs—and he was pictured wearing the Chancellor's gown. The book had gone through eight editions as new degrees and new hoods had been introduced. From the fourth edition, published in 1979, John and Ralph Clifford's successor at the Registry, Philip Moss, had taken over the task of updating the book. The last edition was published in 1998, and John could not say when another might be issued, particularly as the University no longer gave copies to graduates after degree ceremonies as it once did.

In John's time with the firm they had made gowns for many of the famous people who received honorary degrees: Prince Philip, Prince Charles, the King and Queen of Spain, the President of Portugal, the President of Italy, Bill Clinton ... In their centenary year, 1977, they made a gift of the Chancellor's gown to the University for Harold Macmillan. The robe dated from 1930 and was repaired and remade by Vera Bond at a cost of £3,000. It was put on display in the window of Castell's shop and put away in a chest at night, but when the University discovered what it was worth, it was removed to the University offices!

There had been more changes in Oxford academic dress during John's time than for many decades. When women were first permitted to wear mortarboards in the late 1970s, most chose to do so, and the firm was left with a large unsold stock of soft caps. Hood patterns were the same as they had been in 1950s, but new combinations of colours were needed for new degrees. John had brought along some of the recent examples: the Doctor in Clinical Psychology—Burgon shape in blue lined red; the Master of Fine Art—Burgon shape in gold lined white. When a new hood was needed, the University Registry asked Shepherd & Woodward about the colours available, but did not seek their advice about what was appropriate for a particular degree. It would have been logical for the MFA to have black lined gold to fit the pattern established already for the BEd/MEd and BTheol/MTheol degrees. And so the Oxford scheme of hoods continued to be chaotic.

When John had retired as Managing Director of Shepherd & Woodward in 1999, Adrian Palfreyman, his son-in-law, took over as Group Managing Director and so the business remained in the family. In retirement John had maintained his connection with the firm as Chairman. However, he confessed to a lifelong fascination with motorbikes and cars, and now he had more time to indulge his hobby, car rallying. And he admitted he could take an MG to bits, but he couldn't make a gown!

At the conclusion of his talk, John Venables was admitted as a Fellow of the Burgon Society *honoris causa* in recognition of nearly fifty years service in the robemaking business in Oxford.

The rest of the morning session was devoted to three short presentations on different aspects of academic dress.

Silks and damasks

Philip Goff showed three early robes faced with silks of a quality and colour generally unknown to modern robemakers in this country: a Doctor of Laws style judge's gown that may have belonged to Judge Storrey, founder member of the Harvard Law School; a doctoral robe from Harvard dating from the nineteenth century; and an Oxford DCL, possibly from as early as the 1830s, with linings in a pinkish silk. (John Venables believed the Oxford robe must have been refaced by James Clarke: the tape on the sleeves was a peculiarity of that robemaker.)

Phil explained that modern looms cannot weave the style of silk used in the past, but he had found that the old looms had gone to the East. He had located them and had old-style silks rewoven and a silk/rayon mix in flame and plum colours to give a shot crimson effect.

The damasks used for Doctor of Music robes came in many designs, some of them attractive, some of them quite horrid. Phil and others were at work recreating the more beautiful white and cream damasks. Philip Lowe had had a Truro damask made up; a robe brought along by John Venables had Florence damask on the sleeves and facings; and Phil had had an beautiful apple-blossom design woven of the type used for Oxford DMus robes in the past.

Gown key

Dr George Shaw gave a short talk introducing his work in progress on a list identifying the different gowns prescribed by British institutions. As the universities in Britain have grown in number from nine or ten in the late thirties, when George began to take an interest in academic dress, to over a hundred today, the range of gowns and robes has become ever more complicated. He circulated a draft of his list, with entries colour-coded to distinguish the different types and degrees represented.

George is now working with Nick Groves on preparing the key to the identification of hoods for publication, and it is intended to issue it in a format uniform with Nick's hood key.

Unrecorded Oxford academic dress plates

Dr Alex Kerr displayed a unique set of five unrecorded Oxford academic dress engravings that seem never to have progressed beyond the proof stage. He drew attention to features of the robes that helped to date the plates, as well as those which differed from what was to be seen in near contemporary pictorial records. (An article on these plates is included on pp. 44–48 of this *Annual*.)

An Oxford degree ceremony

The Vice-Chancellor's office had generously provided twenty tickets for participants in the Burgon Society's Oxford study day to attend a degree ceremony (officially the Ancient House of Congregation), which was to take place in the afternoon. Early in the autumn, structural problems had been discovered in the roof of the Sheldonian Theatre, where the event would normally have been held, and the building had been closed for repairs. The degree ceremony was transferred to the Examination Schools, the monumental building by T.G. Jackson in High Street. After lunch, those with tickets made their way to the Schools to take their seats.

This was one of the first ceremonies presided over by Dr John Hood as Vice-Chancellor, for which he wore the newly introduced Vice-Chancellor's gown of black damask trimmed with gold lace.

Monuments in college chapels

Alex Kerr led the small group of those who were not attending the degree ceremony on a visit to New College and Merton College chapels to see the monumental brasses and other memorials of figures in academic dress. These represent some of the most important evidence of what robes were like between the late fourteenth and the early seventeenth century: from medieval Doctors of Theology and of Canon Law in cappa clausa and a Master of Arts in his tabard to post-Reformation figures such as Sir Thomas Bodley and Sir Henry Savile in their doctoral undress gowns and hoods.

At the end of the afternoon the two groups met outside the Examination Schools among the new graduates and college deans of degrees in their academic dress, and returned to Trinity College for tea. Our thanks are due to everyone who made the study day such an enjoyable and successful occasion and especially to Dr George Shaw for his generous support in securing Trinity as the venue for the event.

Alex Kerr

